

## [Lore of the Lumberjacks]

### Introduction to LORE OF THE LUMBERJACKS

by May Swenson

He was sitting on a stoop uptown smoking his pipe. The autumn sun was slowly sinking behind the huge grey building down the street. He had his huge, grisly head, tilted to the last rays of yellow light. The expression on his face As the sun finally disappeared behind the building, he took the pipe out of his mouth and spat a huge jawful of saliva into the gutter. Then, sniffing the damp air, he drew his well-worn black overcoat closer around him and glared contemptuously and stared vacantly at the darkening sky. Slowly his His thoughts seemed to be travell travelling West with the sun . A crafty smile spread over his weatherbeaten jaw. [????? ??????????????????] None of your white collar city stuff. He glanced ruefully at his forefinger the stub which was once his forefinger.

"There's a new frontier," he muttered to himself, "airplane "airplanes, radio — a new frontier, the frontier of the sky!" (Text to begin "Pretty cool today etc."—) [A.M.?] [good Tall Tale lw

### FOLKLORE

NEW YORK [?] Forms to be Filled out for Each Interview

FORM A Circumstances of Interview

STATE New York

NAME OF WORKER May [Swenson?]

ADDRESS [228 W. 22nd St. NYC?]

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DATE October [11,?] 1938

SUBJECT [ Lore of the Lumberjacks?]

1. Date and time of interview October 5th [and 6th?], 1938
2. Place of interview His house
3. Name and address of informant John Rivers 656 W 179th St. NYC
4. Name and address of person, if any, who put you in touch with informant.
5. Name and address of person, if any, accompanying you
6. Description of room, house, surroundings, etc.

[10?]

Swenson

# 701127

Oct. 11, 1938

Informant: John Rivers 656 W. 179th St. 3rd floor. N. Y. C.

Subject: Lore of the Lumberjacks Interview held Wednesday, Oct. 5th and Thursday, Oct. 6th.

John Rivers was sitting on the stoop smoking his pipe. He had on a well-worn black overcoat, but no hat-on his grisly close-cropped head.

-Pretty cool today in spite of the sun- I greeted him.

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-Naw- he said. -I like it...I like a nip to the air. - A slyness crept into his smile, and he closed one eye. -I reckon you've come to pester me for a story. Wal, come on in. - He took me to his room at the back of the flat.

-The wife ain't home- he stated after we were seated. -Good thing- he laughed. -She was [askin?] me who the young lady was that was here th' other day. I told her twas none a her biz. She got a little hepped about it. She's likely [t'?] take a broomhandle to ye if she catches a young gal snoopin' in here.... Wal, y'know I'm just foolin'...just a little joke, a little gag as y'might say- He laughed again.

-Will you think me too personal if I ask how you lost your finger?- I asked, thinking there might be a story behind the stub of a forefinger against which his pipe rested.

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-Wal, the cross-saw got it, long ago... Yeh, the two-handled saw y'use at the base of a big tree [cuttin'?] it down. Wal, 'bout forty years it's been I've been minus m'finger. I dont miss it no more. ....Naw, lumberjackin' ain't so dangerous fer them as knows their job... I member one young feller though... a highclimber\* he was... up a big un.. 400 foot or more... loppin' the top. Wal, it was a young tree.. plenty spring in it yet, an' when [the?] top ripped off it throwed the guy right off, from the way it snapped back. A lowwr lower limb caught him [by?] the chin when he fell, and his neck was broke before he hit the ground. His safety belt broke on 'im. But that sort a thing only happened very [?] seldom ... very sel om seldom an accident or nothin. ....Y'know my wife laughs at me fer talkin' always like I'm doin' about ma lumberin' days.... says I got a fix\* on it. Wal, I guess there's a grain a truth there... Yup, then was the days I like to remember an' I liked that work... bein out doors all weathers an' all. It's a man's work alright... non' a yer white collars has got the stuff nowadays.... I been in lots a businesses. I been in rail-roading a while, an I worked in the [?] mills\*, an' I been in fruit produce.. trucking. Seen a good bit a the country in my younger days.. an I tell you thar wasn't no talk of depression then... not that times were better. They was tough. An' tougher than now. Yup. But nobody cried for better or sat down and

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waited fer [?] govermint relief. No sir. The young bucks them days was up an doin' an they made their own way. 'Thout college edications too. My [?] pinion this college degree business does more harm than good. Makes 'em soft. [?] Makes 'em all think they're college professors 'an workin' with their hands not good enough for 'em. [Highclimber?] - a man who lops off the top of a tall tree before it is sawed down from below. [\* Fix: fixation?] [\*mills - saw mills.?)

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Listen.. trouble with young people today is they think too much and do too little. [?] Yup. Y'otta postpone settin' an thinkin' till yer old like me. When there ain't [?] nothin' better t' look [?] [forard?] to. Be up an' doin', young lady. That's my advice t' young people. Go ahead and get some place an' do yer thinkin' later.

.....Them days there was a frontier of industry, y'say? Yeh, that's an ol' argement. There ain't nothin' new t' explore, y'say, eh? No room fer new enterprise, the frontier gone! Listen, don't let 'em kid ye, sister. There's always room t' spread out.... Hey, what about the frontiers of the sky? Naw, I don't mean Venus and Mars..an' we can't quite reach for the moon yet, neither... ha , ha. But lookit airryplanes. Don't yuh know there's a fronteer aint ain't hardly been touched. It's one of my ideas, that there Frontier of the Sky. Y'know it was machinery all along, by golly , made new industry. It was autymobiles, trains - first mail, then transportation, then development till soon everyday use of them new contraptions speeding employment an' progress. Transportation had a lot t'do with settlin' the country. An' now we got the airryplane an' the radio. The airryplane is just a gadget of luxury yet, but wait. Pretty soon for them as has get-up to 'em, airryplanes'll be used fer everything— all kinds of hauling an' commercial traffic an' fer vehicles fer any person t' go places. Yes, sir, the sky'll be full a 'em— an' they'll have to have traffic lights up there. An' listen, when Europe comes to be no further away accordin' to time, y'un'erstan, than say, Floridy er up North, Canady— why a little two-bit squirt [??] won't stand a Chinaman's chance a takin' things over. Cause airryplanes an' radios are gonna [?] make the world one same state.

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An' a little squirt of a two-bit upstart [like that feller Hitler?], with a smudge on his upper lip'll get slammed in the [?] jug fer meddlin meddlin' with what's too big fer him. An' listen, don't get me wrong. I ain't no Comminist. But I got my own ideas, y'un'erstan. An you put a mark on my word, the world ain't so big but what a few men with brains [?] an' the gadgets they can think up with them brains, can't shrink it, till its small enough to handle uner one govermint system. Yup, air's the thing nowadays. Y'see men are getting their wings back—see? An' radio— air— see what I mean? Air— the new frontier!- [Face?]

After this impressive harangue, I ventured to ask Mr. Rivers how a woman, assuming she comes within [?] his category of the “go-getting type”, ought to go about securing a place on the “new frontier of the sky.”

-Listen- he leaned forward in his rocker, and removed his pipe, gesturing for emphasis. - Listen, I aint got nothin' against wimin, un'erstan. Wimin are a most necessary gadget in a man's life.- He winked broadly. -But wimin are makin' a mistake floundrin round floundrin' 'round like they do in a man's world. Wimin has forgotten her place. Listen, do you see a chicken struttin' around crowin an wearin crowin' an' wearin' a comb? D'yuh see a good milk cow tryin' t' dry up her teets an' runnin' round bellerin', believin' she'll be goin' in the bull ring? Animals got more [sence?] sense than humans some ways. Nope. By golly a woman should stay a woman an' not try t'mix in with men's doins. Now, you'd be a lot happier yerself, stayin' [?] home cookin' fer a good man than runnin' around the town gettin' stories fer a newspaper er whatever it is yer gettin' 'em fer.

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A woman ought to fix on bein' a good wife an' mother, bein' sweet an companionable to some husban', an' helpin' him in his work by not bein' too curious about it. Wimin got funny minds. They're made good fer arguin' but never fer settlin' anythin'. Lot's a wimin are smarter than men when it comes to thinkin' up high-falutin' things, but they ain't practicle. They ain't got good practicle hoss sence, an' so their minds are dangerous. The more a woman leaves her mind alone the better women she makes, I always say. An above all it's

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unbecommin' to a woman to try t' be like a man. A whistlin' gal an' a crowin' hen Neither will come to no good end - they used t say. An' there's a lot a truth in that there.....- space

While we were talking, I had heard steps moving about in [?] the kitchen, and now Mrs. Rivers appeared in the doorway, arms akimbo over her apron.

She is a short plump woman with very white hair, pulled back in a 'bun' on the nape of her neck. Looks to be about 65. Pale blue eyes, small features, false teeth with very red gums, which click as she talks. [Mrs.?] Mr. Rivers wriggled in his chair, seeming slightly discomfited, and said:

-Hello 'Gail.- (He had told me his wife's name was Abigail) -You just come in frum marketin'? This here young lady same's was here th' other day is pesterin me fer t' tell her a story about the lumber camp— but I ain't told her nothin' yet.-

-How do? - Mrs. Rivers nodded to me. And to her husband: -Wal, yer willin' enough to talk, I know that.-

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-Whyn't you tell her a story, 'Gail? Tell her how we went on our honeymoon.- He winked. -An' how y'made a wish our married life'd be nice an placid with no grief or accidents, an' then how yuh went an' tumbled over the bridge into the falls, an' I had to jump in an' save yuh. Tell her about our first night we spent in a tourist cabin— an there warn't no blinds on the windows——

Mrs. Rivers put an indignant damper to her husband's joshing by going over to him and emptying the ashtray in the grate, and calling his attention to the ashes he had spilt on the rug. Then she turned to me and said:

-John's a big one fer talkin, Miss. An' the best you can do is not pay a mind to half of what he says, cause he'll talk a leg off yuh an' nothin but lies— nothin but lies. ...Supper's on-

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she informed her husband. -An'I want you to get through eatin' before Bert an' Margaret (their son and daughter-in-law) come in.-

I arose to leave. As John Rivers shuffled into the kitchen, he sniffed at the pea soup heating on the stove, and as he held the [?] door for me, he remarked slyly behind his hand:

-'Gail's a awful good cook anyway. Yup. See what I mean? A woman's place is in the home!-

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Thursday, I made an appointment by phone with Mr. Rivers, hoping this time to get some lumberjack lore from him. I asked him to tell me "how cold it was that year in the lumber camp in Wisconsin." The following tale and the one about [Happy Jack and his Derby?], according to Mr. Rivers, are samples of the tall tales swapped by the lumberjacks during long winter months while confined to their bunkhouse, waiting for the thaw to set in, so that the logs could go down the river. "Happy Jack" and "Noggin" characters in these stories, were the names of lumberjacks in the outfit. And the custom seems to have been for the man telling the story to use as his hero (usually derisively) one of his buddies in the camp.

Wal, I'll tell yuh— by golly it was so cold that time, I 'member that— wal, y'see this was right after a big snowfall lasting three weeks. Everyday snow, snow, snow— till [?] we was up to [?] th' gables in snow. Right up to the roof os [the?] of th' bunkhouse. Then it began t' freeze. An' 'fore long we was 'cased in a solid wall of ice. Only air we had was from [?] th' chimbley which was kep' open by [?] th' smoke from the th' fire. The Th' heat of the smoke kep' [?] th' chimbley clear.

Wal, [?] th' cold spell it seemed like it'd never let up. An' every night we'd cut cards fer a man t'stay over the fire when [?] th' rest turned in, to watch [?] th' fire, not let it go out. An'

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one night Noggin, that was one of [?] th' fellers, he got the low card and stayed with [?] th' fire.

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Wal, I guess ol' Noggin got sleepy what with [?] th' Applejack he'd put away an' all. An' he took him a nap. An' meanwhile [?] th' fire died, an' next thing we was in a fix. [?] Th' chimbley plugfull of icicles, so tough [?] an' so thick that there wasn't no draft come down enough to light a match and make even a stick burn.

Wal, there we was due to suffocate an' freeze at [?] th' same time. No heat, no air, an' it gettin' colder by [?] th' minute. So what to do? Warn't but one thing— dig outselfs out. So [?] th' bunch of us we got out our cross saws an' some band saws we had an' we got out picks an' one thing another, an' opened up [?] th' door (lucky it opened in, cause a solid wall of ice hit right smack up against [?] th' bunkhouse on all sides) An' we commenced to saw ourselfs a tunnel through that ice.

Now, [?] th' bunkhouse was set in a sort of gully-like, with [?] th' front facing a hill, see? Only to the back [?] th' ground was flat for quite some space to [?] th' other side of the gully. An' we figgered dig out toward [?] th' hill an' first thing you know, diggin up-slope that way, you'd hit the surface, seein' the snow , before it froze solid , had drifted down into [?] th' gully. An' most likely left [?] th' top a the hill at least shallow enough so when you got that fer you'd be above the drift.

Now un'erstan we couldn't hardly see our way, [?] th' ice bein' so deep [?] an' thick it shut out all but a little bit a day light. [?] An' bein' way above our heads— four times as tall as a man , at least— we couldn't see above us just where at we was goin'.

Wal, it must a been near onto a week we [?] dug along that tunnel expectin' t' reach [?] th' top where [?] th' hill sloped enough.

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Course [?] th bigger an' longer [?] th' tunnel [??] got th , more air we had, but [?] whew! how cold it was! Ef it hadn't been for that Applejack whiskey— we had a-plenty a jugs of it on hand, an we took a-plenty with us ) — I doubt ef a one of us would a come out a that ordeal alive. But as it was we had a way t' keep us warm inside anyhow.

Wal, by golly, as I was [?] sayin', we sawed an' dug and sawed an' dug, fer it musta been a week or more. An' it looked like we'd never make it to [?] th' top. An' the ice seemin' t' get denser an' the light comin' through fainter. But we went on sawin' an' diggin' our tunnel for 'nother week or two, every day expectin' to hit the top.

Wal, now Noggin— he was [?] th' feller let the fire die out—we penalized him , see? We made him stay at [?] th' cabin and never told him where [?] th' Applejack was hid. It was in [/] th' bottom [?] th' wood barrel all [?] th' time— And by not lettin' him go long with us [?] an' cuttin' down on his liquor, we figgered that was a fit punisiment for a feller who'd lay down on watch an' maybe 'danger [?] th' lives of his pals that way like he done.

So, wal, like I said, we was diggin' an' diggin' an' sawin' an' sawin', an' with very disccuragin' results. An' I tell yuh it was so cold that our hands froze to [?] th' sawhandles an' when we laid down now an' then, usually on Sundays, t'get a little shuteye, we'd have to sleep with our saw / arm 'tached up to the handles where [?] th' saws were stuck in the ice. # Now we never knew if it was hardly night or day an' so a-course we had to make our own system of keepin' track of [?] th' days passin'. So we had a timekeeper who did nothin' but stand an' count [?] th' saw strokes of one feller, an' we figgered 10 roughly five billion, four million, eight thousand, six hundred an' ninety-nine sawstrokes made about twenty-four hours. ( Them boys we had up there in [?] th' 'Consin hills could saw fast alright. ) An so we counter [?] th' days that way. An' Sunday, like I said, we set apart fer sleep, figgerin' one sleep a week ought to be a-plenty fer tough, hardy fellers like us jacks, 'specially in an emergency.

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Wal, wakin' up an' startin' work Monday morning was sure a problem, 'count we'd have to pick [?] th' icicles offen our beards an' out-a our [?] eyelashes , an' sometimes hold a lighted match in our mouths so as to thaw a hole down our throats for [?] th' Applejack [??] to run down.

Y'know , a good whiskey is a godsend in cold weather. Yup, this here Applejack— I reckon you wonder why it didn't freeze too, bein a liquid. Wal, y'know why in winter they put alcohol in car radiators—? Yup, that Applejack was good stuff by golly—about 112 percent!

So we went on a-diggin'. Now , course all the ice we dug away, it had t' go someplace, didn't it? It had to take up space some place. An' so [?] th' only thing we could do was keep pushin' it behind us, makin' [?] th' tunnel, an' by an' by all [?] th' space in back of us was filled up, so we was standin' in a sort of room-like, an' diggin. An' this way, not seein' either back'ards or for'ards, we had very little notion where we was [headen?] headin' , 'cept we [?] kep' a-headin' as close as we could figger for [?] th' side a that hill.

Golly, that was an awful long cold spell that year. 'Cordin' to our figgerin, when we'd been diggin' fer two month an' eight days, it was time fer [?] th' thaw to set in, but nope, 11 it kep' as cold as ever.

It was so cold that pipe smokin' got to be a menace. How was that-? Why, you'd light up an' you'd puff an' you'd happen t' blow a ring or two— an' what happened? It was so cold that [?] th' smoke rings would freeze solid, like doughnuts, an' drop down on yuh. One feller nearly got his eye put out from havin'a frozen smoke ring drop back into his face.

Wal, anyhow, we just kep' on a diggin'- an' t' make [?] th' story short, I'll take yuh t' [?] th' end right now.

Yup, one day we hit [?] th' end a our trail at last. It was three month an' 24 days to be exact when we quit diggin'. Know why? We finally hit right up against [?] th' bunkhouse door!

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Yup. Right where we started from— right at [?] th' front door. Naturally, just like children lost in [?] th' woods, we traveled 'round in a [?] perfec' circle. [We'd?] swung way out to [?] th' left, away from [?] th' hill, made a wide circle over flat land [?] an' fetched up back where we started from.

Wal, some of [?] th' boys was for bein' discouraged. But right away [?] I figgered that things was gone be alright. Cause through [?] th' crack [?] th' door I seen firelight. Yup, we clomped in, an' there we seen how Noggin was all humped up cozy afore [?] th' fire, which was blazin' away pretty as yuh please, an' him cuddlin' a [?] jug of Applejack like it was a baby, an' a big contented grin on his face.

An' when we come in [?] froze stiff, our saws an' picks hangin' off our hands [?] froze solid, why ol' Noggin he commenced [?] t' laugh. An' he laughed till he was tied in knots.

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-I been here soft an' warm a gettin myself liquored up nice,- he says. -While you fellers been traipsin' off to hell an' gone through [?] th' cold. Ef that's punishin' - he says, -punish me some more. I like it.-

Wal, we axed him how he got [?] th' fire started, an' after while he up an' told how he poked around an' poked aroun' till he found where [?] th' Applejack was [?] hid — an' when he found it bottom [?] th' woodbox, it was a cinch to pour a little on the fire an' with that [firewater?] wettin' [?] th' wood, [?] th' touch of a match sent [?] th' flames roarin' up an' thawed out that chimbley in no time.

Wal, we settled down to wait fer [?] th' thaw, an' it wasn't long afore all that [?] ice loosened an' slid down [?] th' guily to [?] th' river. An' soon after that we had [?] th' logs rollin' again.

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But Noggin never got tired ribbin' us about how we was fer punishin' him, an' the Applejack startin' [?] th' fire an' all.... Yup, by golly, yuh gotte admit there ain't nothin'like good ol' 112 percent in cold weather....!